

Theory, Not Practice

In pop culture and high culture, abortion is problematic.

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Pro-abortion ideologies rule among the makers of both the pop culture and the high culture. But in the post-Roe vs. Wade era, both Hollywood and America's literary establishment remain uneasy about the actual practice of abortion.

On television, the correctness of the “pro-choice” position is taken for granted. From Rosie O'Donnell's sermonizing to CNN's coverage of pro-life demonstrations; from the way Seinfeld character Elaine boycotts a pro-life chef to MTV's “rock the vote” promos, television tends to champion abortion as an inalienable right.

And yet, few characters in TV shows or even movies actually get abortions. With a few sometimes odd and indirect exceptions—such as Star Trek: Next Generation's Commander Ryker phasing the clones of himself made by an alien on the grounds that human beings “have a right to control their own bodies”—television characters usually choose life.

It has been observed that an alien biologist could watch earth's television signals broadcast into space and never get the idea that sex has anything to do with procreation. In Hollywood's topsy-turvy juvenile fantasy world, sex is mostly for adolescents and single people. Married couples—and especially parents, ironically enough—are portrayed as asexual. But when a character does get pregnant, she almost always—perhaps after some agonizing for dramatic effect—decides to “keep the baby.”

This is true on sitcoms, soaps, and most dramatic series. It even holds true in cases where, according to the reigning ideology, abortion would definitely be called for, such as when the mother is very old or very young. Even the liberal, feminist, pro-choice, single mother Murphy Brown wanted her baby.

Apparently, abortion and entertainment do not mix. There must be something inherently disturbing about abortion, even for those who believe in it.

If the pop culture presents abortion as OK, but seldom presents it, the high culture of the literary and art world presents it often, but it is not always OK.

Though feminist novels sometimes present abortion as a rite of passage, and purposefully depthless books such as Richard Brautigan's *The Abortion* sometimes present the procedure as no

big deal, most contemporary literature finds it somehow sad. When characters have abortions, we are supposed to sympathize with them. Having an abortion is part of the character's doomed and tragic victimhood.

If abortion is tragic, one wonders, why isn't it something bad? There can be no tragedy without some tragic flaw.

Good literature, of course, is honest, even when it may be ideologically mixed-up. Perhaps the best fictional treatment of abortion was written decades before *Roe vs. Wade* by Ernest Hemingway, who was neither a Christian nor a moralist. In his short story "Hills Like White Elephants," a couple's small talk in an outdoor café becomes an intense psychological drama, exposing the pro-abortionists' dirty little secret—that for all of their "it's the woman's choice" rhetoric, most women who get an abortion do so because they have been pressured by the man.

Another remarkable literary treatment is a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks, an African-American poet lionized by feminists. In "The Mother," a woman—perhaps the poet herself—reflects on her multiple abortions.

"Abortions will never let you forget," she begins. "You remember the children you got that you did not get,/The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,/The singers and workers that never handled the air." She will never give them candy or comfort them or look at them with an adoring "mother-eye."

"I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed children." Though she struggles to rationalize her aborting them, protesting that she loved them anyway and that they were actually "never made," she confesses that such thinking "Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?/You were born, you had body, you died. It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried."

In their heart of hearts, even advocates of abortion know it's wrong.